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## Mattress maker goes after the younger crowd online



Marc Werner started Nature's Sleep after undergoing three neck surgeries. He developed a mattress that would support his neck and back because he couldn't find one that worked. (Susan Stocker / Sun Sentinel)

**W**ould anyone really buy a mattress online — without lying on it?

Mattress maker Marc Werner thinks they would, particularly younger people who are used to buying things on their smartphones.

Werner, founder and CEO of Nature's Sleep in Plantation, developed his Ghostbed memory foam mattress specifically for young consumers. He is marketing GhostBed through Facebook and other social media.

Based on sales in the first four months, Werner believes the e-commerce business could double his company's sales. The largest percentage of sales are through smartphones, he said.

"There's lots of competition," Werner said. "What's happening is the online business is taking over."

Nature's Sleep is an example of retailers who are rushing to grab a bigger bite of a growing online market.

Online retail sales will reach \$334 billion this year in the U.S. and grow to \$480 billion by 2019, according to Forrester's five-year e-commerce forecast, released last April. Already, 69 percent of the online population regularly buys products online.

Until now, Nature's Sleep has not sold to those people directly. The 15-year-old company is a wholesale business, doing about \$50 million in annual revenue through retailers and e-commerce companies.

Werner started Nature's Sleep after undergoing three neck surgeries. Once an avid runner, Werner developed neck problems and trouble sleeping as a result. So he developed a mattress that would support his neck and back because he couldn't find one that worked.

Memory foam was developed in the 1970s under a contract by NASA that set out to improve seat cushioning for pilots. Swedish scientists developed a mattress and launched Tempur-Pedic in the 1990s.

But Werner says Tempur-Pedic products, which cost thousands of dollars, are expensive for 35-and-under consumers. There are lower-cost options, such as a \$399 memory foam from IKEA. Ghostbed is priced right in the middle: \$750 for a queen and \$875 for a king. The 11-inch mattress compresses in a box for delivery and has a 20-year guarantee.

The GhostBed — named for Werner's fear of ghosts under his bed as a child — also comes with a 101-night tryout, exceeding Tempur-Pedic's 90-night and the 100-night offer of another competitor, Casper Sleep.

Werner won't reveal the return rate for competitive reasons, but he said it is low.

Nature's Sleep's retail and e-commerce customers have good things to say about Werner's mattress and pillow designs.

Tim Broderick, CEO of MH2G — recently rebranded from ModernHome2Go — said Nature's Sleep mattresses sell well in his three furniture stores in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. "They have a good design, good manufacturing and a good guarantee. And for us, a decent margin," he said.

But he's not sure how well Werner will do with his GhostBed online business. MH2G began by selling online five years ago, but Broderick found that consumers prefer to lie on a mattress or sit on a couch before buying. So he opened the retail stores.

Brockerick said he found that only about 10 percent of consumers bought online. "You're missing 90 percent of the sales opportunity," he said.

Whether GhostBed takes off or not, Werner still has his wholesale mattress business to fall back on. Nature's Sleep mattresses, toppers and pillows are sold through retailers online and in stores including Sears, Kohl's, Macy's, Costco, Rooms to Go and Wayfair.

Nature's Sleep mattresses also are popular on Groupon, the Chicago-based e-commerce marketplace.

Colleen Raper, a category manager for Groupon Goods, said Nature's Sleep is one of the top three mattress vendors on Groupon. She said the mattresses are competitively priced and receive high customer ratings.

"Nature's Sleep customers typically align with the average Groupon customers, which is a college-educated female between the ages of 35 and 50," she said.

The business is family-run by design — a Werner family tradition. His daughter Ashley, 29, leads social media while his wife, Donna, oversees human resources and administrative functions. The company has a full-time staff of 30.

"I love family business. It keeps a family together," Werner said.

Werner, 58, said he learned to run a business by working for his father and grandfather's company, Werner Ladder in Pennsylvania.

Werner's grandfather Herbert founded Werner Ladder, a leader in the world market for ladders for business and home use. Then his father joined the company and updated the ladder with new materials.

"My dad, Robert, invented the aluminum and fiberglass ladder and is still going strong at 85," Werner said.

After gaining experience in outside businesses, Werner joined the family business for a while. Then, to address his own neck pain, he decided to focus on the mattress and pillow market. Besides Nature's Sleep mattresses, he also designed a special mattress for his wife, who tends to sleep on her stomach.

In March, Werner was awarded U.S. patents on his designs for an anti-snoring pillow and cover.

Online Unique Monthly Visitors: 1,277,531

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